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Empowering Our Ministry: Spiritual Gifts II

Romans 12:1-6a

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(Reconstructed from notes)

LESSON Romans 12:1-6a (from the New English Bible)
Therefore, my brothers, I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to Him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for His acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.
In virtue of the gift that God in His grace has given me I say to everyone among you: do not be conceited or think too highly of yourself; but think your way to a sober estimate based on the measure of faith that God has dealt to each of you. For just as in a single human body there are many limbs and organs, all with different functions, so all of us, united with Christ, from one body, serving individually as limbs and organs to one another.
The gifts we possess differ as they are allotted to us by God's grace, and must be exercised accordingly

This morning I would like to talk with you a while about Romans 12. The liturgist for the morning has already led you all in a corporate reading of this passage from the New English Bible, which I've chosen because it conveys the Greek text in a more refreshing way than the NRSV which we have in our pews.

Of course, chapter 12 of Romans is preceded by chapters 1-11, and these are some of the most important of all Biblical chapters. Romans, as a book, is foundational, and full of really, really good stuff. But to set the scene, let me simply say that chapters 1-11 speak about how we are lost in sin and how God came to us in Christ. These chapters speak of how we've been set free from the dominion of sin. And they speak about how Christ is always with those who accept Him as Savior and Lord.

It is because of the mercy God has shown us that Paul, in chapter 12, urges us to present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. And because of the mercy God has shown us, we are also urged to be connected to the 'body' (as limbs and organs) by using the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to each person by the Holy Spirit, with His mind in the selection process.

Now, this morning I want to illustrate the use of some of the spiritual gifts listed in the Bible, but before I do that I want all of us to look again at the Romans 12 passage printed in your worship bulletin. Paul tells us to adapt ourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but to let our minds be remade and our whole nature thus transformed.

What does it mean to adapt to the pattern of this present world? This world in which we live, the not-Jesus Christ part, has a pattern of doing things, a way of going about it's business. We are urged and exhorted to recognize this worldly pattern, and to

get out of it, to stop adapting to this pattern. What makes up this pattern? [Ask for hands and comments regarding this worldly 'pattern'] Yes, those are excellent examples. Now, what about God's pattern? [Ask for hands and comments regarding God's 'pattern'] Yes, thank you for those as well. You see the contrast. It's important to see the contrast, which helps us recognize the first, the worldly, pattern. A pattern so a part of our lives we often fail to see it.

Someone mentioned the world's expectation for instant gratification. That's an important one to focus on for a moment, but of course the others were good too. But the instant gratification piece is important because it leads to the service economy that America is becoming, and to the sense that we can take shortcuts to get to where we want to go.

How many of you would say that you don't have a reasonably good understanding of the Bible? [Raise hands] I see that probably 75% of you have raised your hands. So I like to ask you a question: WHY NOT? Many of you have been Christians for a long time, and the Bible isn't rocket science. It's not that hard. But, you see, you've been seduced by the pattern of this world, the instant gratification that tells us we don't have to work very hard for stuff, we can expect it will be just given to us, or we can wait and it will be given to us.

Of course, that's not God's pattern. And this is what I'm trying to say. It's all about adapting. It's all about choosing which pattern to which we will adapt. Because we will adapt to one or the other. The Old Testament puts it this way - 'Choose this way whom you will serve.' If you don't choose Jesus, you have chosen the other way, the other pattern.

You know, C. S. Lewis' great work of fiction, The Screwtape Letters, puts one devil giving advice to a junior devil about how best to entrap humans and get them to avoid God's holy ways. Do you know what the very best advice is? It's this: tell the humans there is plenty of time, there is no need to do anything about God's pattern today, you can always be godly tomorrow, but today you can live and be merry, and gratify your desires. It's the Satanic flip side of the 12-step movement, one day at a time avoiding the way of Jesus.

In the passage from Romans 12, Paul even illustrates this point by telling everyone not to be conceited or think too highly of themselves (adapting to the pattern of this world), but think your way to a sober estimate (of yourself) based on the measure of faith God has given you (God's pattern). Paul faces head on the most basic problem any of us have - confusing who is God with who is creature, the eternal issue of idolatry.

Discipleship, growing in the faith, is the process of learning how to adapt to Jesus. So, in the context of remembering God's mercy to us, we are to offer ourselves to God and to the church. Recognizing who we are leads us to recognize that the Holy Spirit has given us incredible spiritual gifts, so that we can be limbs and organs 'to one another.'

Roughly, there are three groupings of spiritual gifts which I will be preaching about in the weeks to come. Romans 12, in the verses following the passage from this morning, talks about the 'motivational gifts.' These are sometimes called 'adhesive' gifts because when used effectively, they help the body to stay together for its work. Ephesians 4 has those gifts which focus on 'calling or offices,' and these are found in ministries of equipping each of us to do the work of ministry, which we believe is the job of every Christian. 1 Corinthians 12 speaks about the 'manifestation gifts,' the ones which manifest the presence and reality of the Holy Spirit and give glory to Jesus Christ.

But this morning I want to talk about a set of ideas that may come to us from any number of people. These are ideas about what we should do in the next year. Let's say we have six ideas which all sound good. How do we decide? I need some volunteers to help me here. [Pass out the five hand signs in no particular order with the titles, 'administration,' 'faith,' 'helps,' 'leadership,' and 'discernment']

Thank you for, ah, volunteering! Please come on up here to the front. Ok. Now, we have these ideas about what we should do, but we have these five people who are confirmed in the use of some pretty wonderful spiritual gifts. Knowing that these gifts are theirs, these people will be both fulfilled and fruitful in their use; they will feel God's power surging through them and know that God is using them, and the use of these gifts, used in the building up of the body of Christ, will be immensely effective.

So, who do we go to first to see about these six ministry ideas? Yes, that's right, we go to the person with the gift of discernment. The Holy Spirit has gifted [name of person holding sign] with the ability to know which ideas are from God, which ones are of merely human origin, and which ones are from Satan. His counsel helps us narrow the choices down to three.

Now, who's next? Yes, the person with the gift of faith. God has endowed this person with the ability to have a sense of certainty about which project is THE ONE which God wants to see accomplished. The gift of faith allows this person to be a tremendous cheerleader for this project, with a faith that can move mountains.

So, who will be the project manager for this gig? You bet. The person with the gift of leadership has the ability to see the 'big picture.' This person will keep us on track, and will stay on target when others try to move the body into a different direction before we complete God's project which we are trying to bring to life.

Who will help with the organization and motivation of the crews to get the job done? Yes. The person with the gift of administration. This person is able to get people excited and motivated and organized and to the work that needs to be done.

The person with the gift of 'helps' is a kind of a symbol. While it's true that someone with this gift is really able to jump in there and be incredibly helpful in getting a job done, it's also true that all of us are part of the body, and we all need to help with the work of ministry. It's like the gift of evangelism. The person gifted with the spiritual gift of evangelism is specially able to bring people to commitment in Christ, but that doesn't mean that the rest of us are off the hook - we're all supposed to witness to what we know to be true, and God may give you the privilege of being present with someone when they make the commitment to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. The evangelist will have this happen more often and more naturally, since s/he has been gifted with the ability to communicate the Gospel incredibly effectively. But we are all to 'evangelize.' So, in the same way, we are all 'to help' with the work of ministry.

What's yet to be done? We have to get to the understanding of our spiritual gift and get to using it (or the gift mix we might be given) in the best ministry for that gift or gift mix. As I've said before, we need to DISCOVER our spiritual gift, DEVELOP our spiritual gift, and USE our spiritual gift. That way we will be the church of Jesus Christ.

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